Butterflies in the Flames: Romantic Ballet and the Spectacle of the Burning Ballerina

Katy Oliver

Abstract: *Some of Romantic ballet's best-remembered dancers are those who burned to death in horrific stage accidents. As a grisly form of visual spectacle, the dancer-aflame both disturbed and excited those who bore witness to it. This article explores how the figure of the burning ballerina is rendered—immortally—as a dual emblem: living virtuoso and dead angel of the dance. On the page, the ballerina metamorphoses beneath the weight of the competing configurations imposed upon the narrative of her death, configurations of pious disembodiment and agonizing 'hyper'-embodiment, in which the body must carry both the weight of its own damaged viscera and the weight of aesthetic figuration.*

This article discusses the frightening delights of looking at—and writing about—bodies on the cusp of decay, death, and dissolution, even at the height of its aesthetic perfection. All the while, this body possesses a powerful presence of its own, never fully recoverable, but always inviting us to look again.

Keywords: *aromantic ballet, dance, romanticism, nineteenth century, affect, inscription, sympathy, gothic, aesthetics, pain.*

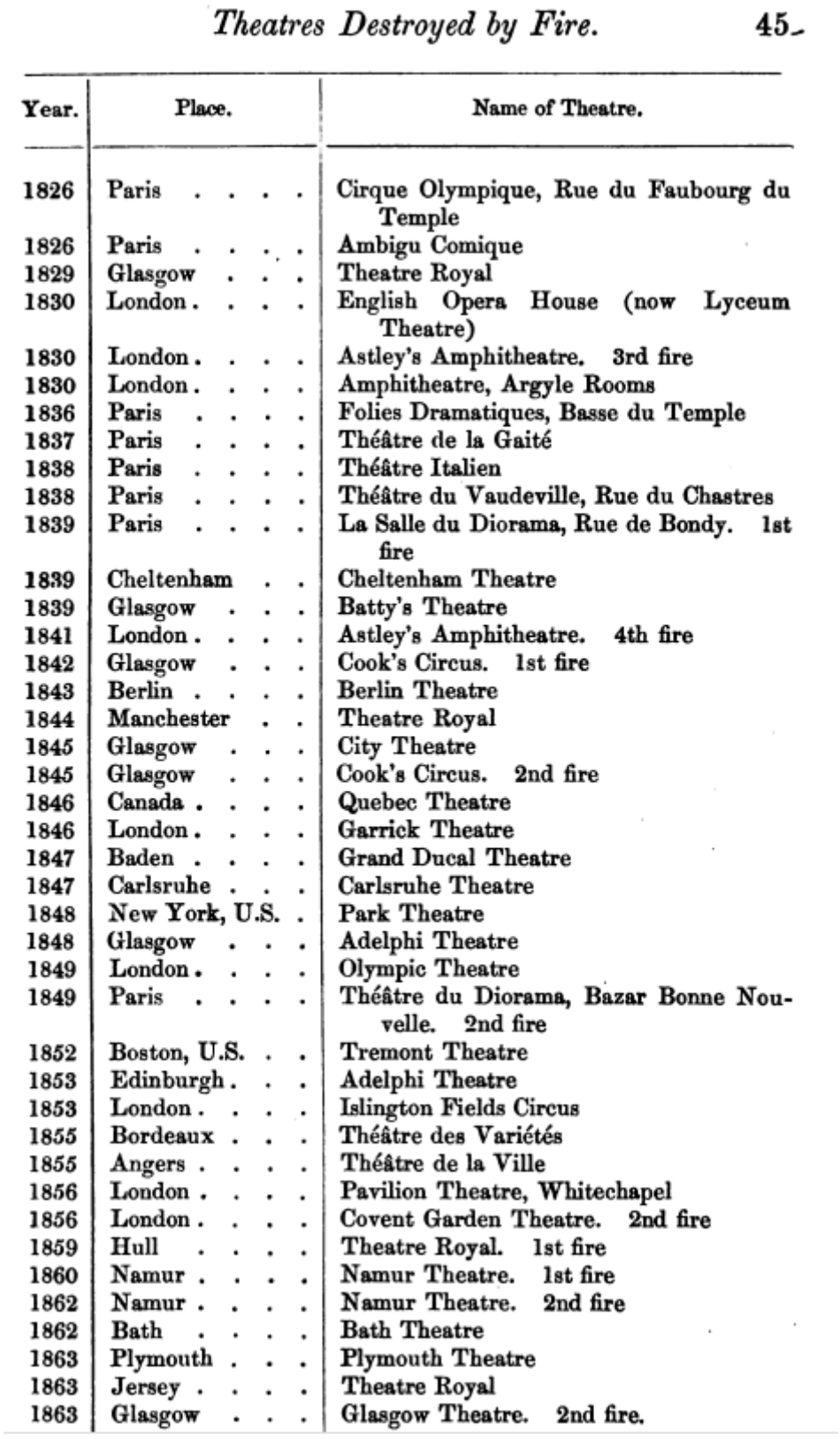
What was going on in this young soul so fatally doomed to suffering? What regrets crossed her imagination? What hopes did she have? What feelings were blooming in her, that she felt wither before they blossomed? God and his good angel alone know this; his confessor will not reveal anything.

Paul d'Ambert, "Emma Livry" (translated from the original French)

1. 1. Prelude: Ballet in flagrante

This article offers a somaesthetic reading of a peculiar rhetorical and aesthetic problem (or, rather, a constellation of interrelated problems) that I observe within the history, culture, and study of Romantic ballet. In diagnosing these problems, we must begin with a discussion of *techne*—that is, a *techne* of singular importance to the Romantic ballet. This technology is one of the world's oldest and most two-faced, and its connection and application to nineteenth-century ballet, though of undeniable significance, was essentially accidental in nature. I speak here of the *techne* of fire. As a consequence of gas lighting and the explosion in popularity of several new and highly flammable fabrics, fire became inextricably bound to the history and aesthetic development of Romantic ballet. Open gas jets and uncovered footlights were particularly prone to destruction; many fires started because of a piece of fabric—a curtain or a costume, draped or worn—lingered for too long near an open flame.

The burning theater was such a frequent and horrific danger during the nineteenth century that Sir Eyre Massey Shaw, the first Chief Officer of London's Metropolitan Fire Brigade, wrote and published the first edition of his treatise *Fires in Theatres* in 1867. By his own admission, Shaw's account of theater conflagrations is not exhaustive, due to the sheer volume and scope of the research necessary to compile such a record: "The following is a list which I have collected with much difficulty, and from many sources, of theatres destroyed by fire, and I believe it to be correct as far as it goes, but not at all complete, nor even approaching to completeness" (Shaw, 1867, p. 44). Figures 1 and 2 below show Shaw's list of theater-destroying fires from the range of dates that I give for the Romantic period of ballet, 1827-1870. The list, Shaw (1867) explains, contains only those theaters completely destroyed by fire, for "it is impossible for [him], at present, to give an estimate" of theaters "merely damaged" by fire, their numbers being so immense (p. 44). He adds that "This account of accidents ... [is] merely collected from such sources as happen at the moment to be at my command. I have no doubt whatever that, if I had more time at my disposal, both lists could be very largely increased" (Shaw, 1867, p. 47).



Theatres Destroyed by Fire. 45.

Year.	Place.	Name of Theatre.
1826	Paris	Cirque Olympique, Rue du Faubourg du Temple
1826	Paris	Ambigu Comique
1829	Glasgow . . .	Theatre Royal
1830	London	English Opera House (now Lyceum Theatre)
1830	London	Astley's Amphitheatre. 3rd fire
1830	London	Amphitheatre, Argyle Rooms
1836	Paris	Folies Dramatiques, Basse du Temple
1837	Paris	Théâtre de la Gaité
1838	Paris	Théâtre Italien
1838	Paris	Théâtre du Vaudeville, Rue du Chastres
1839	Paris	La Salle du Diorama, Rue de Bondy. 1st fire
1839	Cheltenham . .	Cheltenham Theatre
1839	Glasgow . . .	Batty's Theatre
1841	London	Astley's Amphitheatre. 4th fire
1842	Glasgow . . .	Cook's Circus. 1st fire
1843	Berlin	Berlin Theatre
1844	Manchester . .	Theatre Royal
1845	Glasgow . . .	City Theatre
1845	Glasgow . . .	Cook's Circus. 2nd fire
1846	Canada	Quebec Theatre
1846	London	Garrick Theatre
1847	Baden	Grand Ducal Theatre
1847	Carlsruhe . . .	Carlsruhe Theatre
1848	New York, U.S. .	Park Theatre
1848	Glasgow . . .	Adelphi Theatre
1849	London	Olympic Theatre
1849	Paris	Théâtre du Diorama, Bazar Bonne Nouvelle. 2nd fire
1852	Boston, U.S. . .	Tremont Theatre
1853	Edinburgh . . .	Adelphi Theatre
1853	London	Islington Fields Circus
1855	Bordeaux . . .	Théâtre des Variétés
1855	Angers	Théâtre de la Ville
1856	London	Pavilion Theatre, Whitechapel
1856	London	Covent Garden Theatre. 2nd fire
1859	Hull	Theatre Royal. 1st fire
1860	Namur	Namur Theatre. 1st fire
1862	Namur	Namur Theatre. 2nd fire
1862	Bath	Bath Theatre
1863	Plymouth . . .	Plymouth Theatre
1863	Jersey	Theatre Royal
1863	Glasgow . . .	Glasgow Theatre. 2nd fire.

Figure 1 *Eyre Massey Shaw, Fires in Theatres, 1876, p. 45*

46 *Theatres Destroyed by Fire.*

Year.	Place.	Name of Theatre.
1863	Vienna	Théâtre Treumann
1863	Rome	Théâtre Alberti
1863	Barcelona . . .	Barcelona Theatre
1863	Boston, U.S. . .	Grand National Theatre
1864	Chambéry . . .	Chambéry Theatre
1865	Edinburgh . . .	Royal Theatre
1865	London	Surrey Theatre. 2nd fire
1865	Sheffield . . .	Theatre Royal
1865	Stockholm . . .	Théâtre du Parc
1865	Verona	Théâtre Mondini
1865	Breslau	Theatre Royal
1866	London	Standard Theatre
1866	Cincinnati, U.S. .	Opera Theatre
1866	Constantinople .	Théâtre Impérial
1866	New Orleans, U.S.	Grand Theatre
1866	Paris	Théâtre des Nouveautés
1867	Bourges . . .	Théâtre de la Ville
1867	Namur	Namur Theatre. 3rd fire
1867	New York, U.S. .	Bowery Theatre
1867	New York, U.S. .	Winter Garden Theatre
1867	St. Louis, U.S. .	Théâtre Comique
1867	Philadelphia, U.S.	Varieties Theatre
1867	Madrid	Théâtre du Conservatoire
1867	San Francisco . .	Great American Theatre
1867	London	Her Majesty's Theatre, Haymarket. 2nd fire
1867	Paris	Théâtre de Belleville
1868	Turin	Theatre Nota
1868	New York, U.S. .	Butler's American Theatre
1868	Vienna	Orpheum Theatre
1868	Venice	Théâtre de Trévise
1869	Glasgow . . .	Prince of Wales's Theatre
1869	Hull	Hull Theatre. 2nd fire
1869	Durham . . .	Durham Theatre
1869	Dresden . . .	Court Theatre
1870	Glasgow . . .	Alexandra Theatre

Figure 2 *Eyre Massey Shaw, Fires in Theatres, 1876, p. 46*

Subsequent editions of Fires in Theatres gave updated accounts of the fires, and indeed, many significant and devastating fires were right around the corner. While I must share Shaw's (1867) method of reporting that such fires are simply too numerous to list in full, some of the most devastating were the Brooklyn Theatre fire of 1875, wherein as many as 300 people died (the exact number is unknown), 1887's Exeter Theatre Royal fire, which killed 186 people, and Chicago's Iroquois Theater fire in 1903, which killed 602. In 1873, just seven years after Shaw's publication emerged, the Paris Opéra's own ballet stage, the Salle de Peletier, was to burn to the ground, prompting the construction of the Palais Garnier, which is still in use today.

Partial fires, while perhaps not as spectacular to the passer-by as the total immolation of a theater, could be equally as disastrous. Many ballerinas lost their lives or else were gravely injured when their costumes caught fire, a phenomenon the British medical journal *The Lancet* (1868) called "The Holocaust of Ballet-Girls" due to the dreadful frequency of such events (p. 631). The grisly technology of the burning ballerina "form[ed] one of the most horrible realities, yet one so obvious that it may occur again, at any moment, of the theatrical life" (Duyckinck, 1845, p. 71). In Aristotelian terms, a *techne*, by its very nature, is a repeatable practice that is tied to some kind of skill. Though one may be inclined to categorize fire as a 'wild' element—that is, a naturally occurring phenomenon that is not a technology in and of itself—or even an instance of poiesis, the product of a practice that stands alone as a created object—the mythological origins of fire often mark it as gift (or theft) of a tool of the gods. In experimentations with the burgeoning technologies of light, such as the gas lamp and the gas-jet footlight, and with the highly flammable fabrics of the Romantic costume, Romantic ballets created the conditions in which a ballerina could burn again and again. Despite repeated warnings and pleas from fire brigadiers and scientists, most theaters were slow to implement adequate fireproofing and fire-prevention measures. This reticence to make use of life-saving technologies induced in many journalists, ballet reviewers, and theater fire chroniclers a sense of resignation and despair. "Barbarities of the Theater," an 1845 article in *The Broadway Journal*, describes the burning death of English ballerina Clara Webster:

> *Miss Clara Webster, a dancer of ability and a favorite of the audience, was performing in the opera of the Revolt of the Harem, in the bath scene, where there is a miserable attempt at the representation of water, and women bathing in it … There is nothing to be said against the indecency of such an exhibition, for it was too painful and revolting to produce any other feeling than an uncomfortable disgust. Painted actresses with staring eyes, … illuminated in a glare of light, like Dante's figures in purgatory, offer the least attractive subject of contemplation in the world. Miss Webster was engaged in this gross show of tinsel, when her gauze dress took fire from the lights placed below. She was immediately enveloped in flames, and ran about the stage shrieking for help, avoided and shaken off by the other dancers, at the peril of their lives, till the carpenter at the side scene, rolled himself over her, and extinguished the fire at the cost of great personal suffering to himself. She was taken home to die—and the play went on to the conclusion. This reads like a reflection of the humanity of an English audience. So it occurred. Yet, as they were men and women, that vision, clad in fire, must rise up before them as a horrible portent—the extremest agony of pain, lit up by the blaze of a theater. What light foot can tread the boards again? (Duyckinck, p. 71)*

Another incident, the deaths of the Gale sisters (depicted in Figure 3), is perhaps one of Romantic ballet's better-known tragedies. In 1861, Philadelphia's Continental Theatre caught ablaze, again when a dancer's costume touched a gas jet. Four sisters engaged as dancers at the theater, Cecilia, Ruth, Abeona, and Hannah Gale, were among those who lost their lives.

Figure 3 *"Frightful Scene in the Dressing-Room of the Continental Theatre, Philadelphia, on the Evening of Saturday, September 14, 1861—Accidental Burning of a Portion of the Ballet Corps While Preparing for the Dance in Shakespeare's Play of the "Tempest," Resulting in the Death of Seven of the Dancers.Sketched by Mr. Oehlschlager, Who Witnessed the Catastrophe," detail, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, September 28, 1861, 312-3. House Divided Project at Dickinson College*

Richmond's *Daily Dispatch* describes the event in an article published two weeks later:

> *It appears that Miss Cecilia [Gale], one of four talented and handsome sisters, was about robing herself in ballet costume. She stood upon a settee to reach her dress, and somehow flirted it into a jet of gas, when it was instantly ignited. Before the young lady could recover from her fright her clothing was all ablaze, and her sisters and several of the ballet girls from an adjoining dressing room, rushing up to assist her, were in turn set on fire. About a dozen of these helpless girls were thus burning at once, and the fire ran over their gauze and among their underclothes, making fast to their close leggins or "tights," and literally burning to the bone. […]*
>
> *Miss Cecilia Gale, writhing and still in flames, darted down the stairs as stated, and was caught by Mr. Bayard, a stage carpenter, who at once tore up the sea cloth, a sheet of canvas used to make waves, and wrapped it around her. He was much burned while doing this. The young lady was removed to the hospital soon afterwards.*

> *Several girls leaped into the street, through the second story windows, and Miss Hannah Gale, already badly burned, fell upon the pavement, bruising her back and head so that her case is considered hopeless.*
>
> *Miss Phœbe Norden, of Bristol, Pennsylvania, inhaled the flames and was shockingly burned. She was at the point of death last evening.*
>
> *Miss Annie Phillips died on Sunday morning.*
>
> *Miss Anna McBride was burned in the breast, arms and legs, and taken to the Pennsylvania Hospital. She suffered the most excruciating pain during Saturday night; but towards morning her delirium abated, and she died in the arms of Mrs. Wheatley.*
>
> *Miss Annie Nicholas was somewhat burned, but in the panic which ensued after the accident she jumped from the head of the flies to the stage--twenty-five feet--and breaking through a lot of mirrors and plate glass used to represent a lake, her hands and cheeks were lacerated.*
>
> *Ruth and Adeline Gale were burned in the hands and breast.*
>
> *Mrs. Mary E. Herman suffered exceedingly.*
>
> *Abby Carr, Margaret Conway, Thomas Bayard, Kate Harrison, and a young man, name unknown, were more or less badly burned. The last named inhaled the fire and his lungs have since been bleeding.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *The telegraph has announced the death of the sixth of the sufferers—one of the Misses Gale. ("The Recent Terrible Accident at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia," 1861, p. 1)*

The Continental Theatre fire would ultimately claim the lives of nine dancers. *The Adams Sentinel*, a Gettysburg newspaper, published a brief article following the death of Hannah Gale, one of the first Gale sisters to succumb to her wounds. The article gives a brief but detailed account of Hannah Gale's last hours:

> *Hannah Gale had lain at Grear's saloon. Soon after she was brought there her pain ceased—the result of inward mortification. She was entirely tranquil, and calmly asked those present to read the Bible to her. An intimate friend, Miss Annie Wilkes, spent some time with her reading the sacred book. For herself she had no apprehensions, but for her sisters and mother she felt keen anxiety.*
>
> *Hannah Gale died at 3 o'clock. A death-bed more solemn, yet less mournful, is seldom seen. ("The death-bed of a ballet girl," 1861, p. 1)*

Both the article in *The Adams Sentinel* and the illustration of the fire from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (Figure 3) organize and aestheticize the events of the fire into a dramatic tableau, though each goes about it in an entirely distinct fashion. *The Adams Sentinel's* depiction

of Hannah Gale, which hinges on her moral character and her last fleeting moments of subjecthood, must more or less elide the body of the dancer in order to free her (or perhaps more accurately, the reader) from the awful burden of her wounds—and the disrepute of her profession. In performing this unburdening, The Adams Sentinel's reporter aims to convince "Those who suppose that the theatrical profession is inconsistent with fervent piety" that this is not so (1861, p. 1).

In shifting the focus from the body to the more abstract—and impervious—qualities of Gale's interior being, the author of the *Adams Sentinel* (1861) article also obscures the reader's 'view' of Gale's extensive injuries. Gale's bodily displacement through language pre-empts language used today in the medical field. In her essay "The Pain Scale," Eula Biss (2007) discusses the way that the use of a numerical scale for grading the intensity of pain ultimately solidifies pain into an orderly, legible, and quantifiable phenomenon. Pain, which is famously resistant to articulation—beyond 'inarticulate' cries and moans of suffering—is a deeply, almost irrevocably individuated experience, and so the use of tools like the pain scale are intended to provide a framework for assessing and cataloguing pain to simplify the process of its treatment. However, one of the side effects of this solidification is that a patient's pain may become so abstracted from its lived sensation (or deadened via language) as to become utterly disembodied. On the experience of using such diagnostics to assess pain, Biss (2007) writes,

> *The sensations of my own body may be the only subject on which I am qualified to claim expertise. Sad and terrible, then, how little I know. "How do you feel?" the doctor asks, and I cannot answer. Not accurately. "Does this hurt?" he asks. Again, I'm not sure. "Do you have more or less pain than the last time I saw you?" Hard to say. I begin to lie to protect my reputation. I try to act certain. (p. 9)*

As the pain scale (or abstracting language more broadly) renders a patient's pain increasingly inscrutable to him- or herself, the same thing may take place as the patient communicates with medical professionals. This is to some extent by design: "'One of the functions of the pain scale … is to protect doctors—to spare them some emotional pain. Hearing someone describe their pain as a ten is much easier than hearing them describe it as a hot poker driven through their eyeball into their brain'" (Biss, 2007, p. 24).

A similar form of readerly 'protection' takes place in the *Adams Sentinel* (1861) article. By constructing Hannah Gale as having lived a "blameless life" of unselfish love for her sisters and widowed mother, the author of the article is able to soften—and eventually overshadow altogether—the dreadful implications of Gale's "inward mortification" via the account of her moral bravery and "sustaining grace" in the face of total personal destruction (1861, p. 1). Meanwhile, Gale's beauty and skill as a dancer, while mentioned briefly at the beginning of the article, are held at arm's length as she is disembodied into a state that is "entirely tranquil," where she has "no apprehensions" concerning her own safety, comfort, or possible recovery (1861, p. 1). This forms a stark contrast with the image of a frantic Gale "leap[ing] into the street, through the second story windows … already badly burned," who "f[alls] upon the pavement, bruising her back and head so that her case is considered hopeless" ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). Instead, we find a serene image of a person who experiences "a degree of resignation too sublime," which allows the dying dancer to "[converse] as few people would suppose her capable of conversing" ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). That is to say, Hannah Gale may be fully extrapolated from her dancerly body of flesh, severing her from the suggestion

of impropriety, lowliness, or 'bawdy embodiment' that forms the context of the ballet girl and relocating her to a place where the "veil between life and eternity" is insubstantial, where one's "last breath" is a sublime mechanism that voices the name of the perfectly eternal ("The Recent Terrible Accident," 1861, p. 1). This functions to decontextualize or abstract Hannah Gale from her life and render her the chaste object of pity that may be satisfactorily contained within a column of newsprint—her true deathbed, as it were.

Much more in keeping with the tone of the *Daily Dispatch* article is the sketch from *Frank Leslie's* (1861). *The Daily Dispatch* (1861) article, with its long litany of the wounded, dead, and dying, levels a sympathetic but unflinching gaze at the dancers' burning bodies. The materiality and duration of its narration are incredibly physical; death has a certain rhythm as it unfolds. The sketch, meanwhile, offers a surprisingly graphic depiction of the fire, but one that is also undoubtedly aestheticized—rendered 'scene-like'—for the benefit of the onlooker.

The Frank Leslie's (1861) sketch depicts the moment that the fire has just begun to engulf its victims. Ballerinas in the foreground run from the conflagration while looking over their shoulders, their gazes turned toward the surging death that swallows the changing room. The fire itself, an object of terror and sorrow, forms a white slash upon the picture plane, distinct from the grayscale gradient that defines the other figures. The fire's distinct lack of crosshatched texturing transforms it into a void upon the page, into which the figures of the burning ballerinas fade into faint outlines, consumed, bodies already made phantasmal by its monstrous heat.

The elaborate and beautifully-rendered lace of the dancers' skirts draws the eye with increasing insistence, particularly to the figure of the ballerina who has fallen to her knees, whose skirt burns with a torrent of flame almost resembling folded wings. With her eyes downcast, her pose reads as ambiguous—has she swooned in a moment of physical agony as the fire scalds her skin? Has she fallen prey to a paroxysm of despair at her impending death? She presses her hands between her knees as though to prevent her skirt from riding up her thighs in a strange show of self-conscious modesty. Others look on her suffering with horror, transfixed. The ballerina standing most directly in the foreground flees, not yet touched by the licking tongues of white flame. She stands in a mutated *fondu* as her right calf, as starkly bright and untextured on the page as the fire, juts out for our examination. Her floral headpiece cascades down her back, her bearing still elegant even in her terrible distress. A soft circular patch of illumination beneath her feet functions almost as a spotlight as she crosses paths with the only male figure on the page, who strides toward the fire with his arms outstretched, carrying a flame-suppressing cloth. He rushes to save a figure in the middle plane who poses in a fashion that is nakedly theatrical, one arm cast out in lamentation and the other hand braced against her brow as she sinks into shadow. Other figures raise their arms in attitudes of prayer or desperate passion. Delicate feet in pointe shoes bound this way and that in futile attempts to escape.

The dancers are dying beautifully. Unlike the reverent and sublime depiction of Hannah Gale in *The Adams Sentinel* (1861), which disembodies her in a deliberate project of 'spiritual beautification,' the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (1861) sketch insists upon the awful—yet simultaneously graceful—physicality of the burning dancers. This is an act of 'hyper'-embodiment, in which the body is made to carry not only the weight of its own visceral matter, but also the weight of aesthetic figuration. The hyper-embodied dancer is there to be read literally rather than allegorically, and as such it engenders an aesthetic, sympathetic, and affective response from those who look on. The caption of the *Frank Leslie's* (1861) sketch takes care to emphasize that the artist is one "Who Witnessed the Catastrophe" ("Frightful Scene in

the Dressing-Room," 1861, pp. 312-3). This element of supposed verisimilitude seems crucial. Did it really look like that? the captioned image invites us to ask. *Was that really how it was? Am I too witnessing the event as though I had been there?*

The image creates a sense of irresolvable mystery. This brings us to the true beginning of this article: the immolation, the silence, and the enigma of Emma Livry, a dancer whose brief but remarkable career and harrowing slow death render her indelibly—immortally—as an emblem of Romantic ballet. In text, Livry metamorphoses beneath the weight of the very same competing aesthetic configurations of pious disembodiment and agonizing hyper-embodiment that ballet writers imposed upon the Gale sisters. All the while, she possesses a powerful and moving affect of her own, never exhaustible, never fully recoverable, but always inviting us to look again.

2. The Long Death of Emma Livry

The death of Emma Livry is one of ballet's best-known tragedies. Ivor Guest, one of nineteenth-century ballet's foremost historians, goes so far as to mark her death as the point at which the 'twilight' of French ballet becomes irreversible—the point at which it is dying, and, far to the east, the Russian Imperial style is entering full bloom (1953, p. xi). The loss of Livry in 1863 is a foreshock; the Siege of Paris in 1870, *the coup de grâce*. It is not difficult to understand why Livry's story is so persuasively memorable; the facts of the case are quite simple. She was young, she was sweetly pious, she was shockingly talented—poised to become one of the next true greats—and she died horribly: all the necessary ingredients of a tragedy.

But why does her story emerge as the turning point of an entire era? What lodges Livry so insistently in the collective memory of the art form, and what compels me to lay her burnt body at the center of this article? The answer, or answers, lie snarled in the tangled channels of affect, somaesthetics, history, and the sensitive, sympathetic nexus that is the body.

First, a brief biographic sketch: in 1842, Emma Livry was born Emma Marie Emarot, the illegitimate daughter of the Baron de Chassiron and his mistress, Célestine Emarot, a former dancer with the Paris Opéra.[1] Célestine Emarot noticed early in Emma's childhood that she possessed an aptitude for ballet, so she enrolled her in lessons with a colleague from her own time at the Paris Opéra. Livry's talent was prodigious and her ascent towards mastery rapid; these qualities, as well as the help of her mother's subsequent entanglement with the Vicomte Ferdinand de Montguyon (a great lover of the ballet), meant that by 1858, Emma was able to make her début performance at age sixteen—and in a principal *rôle*, no less.

Livry's first *rôle* was that of the titular Sylph in *La Sylphide*. Her début was an enormous success, and many critics remarked that her talent and feeling for the dance were astonishing—and that time and experience would smooth out what few imperfections remained in her technique. (In what would be an ironic prophecy, others were more skeptical, worrying "'What accidents might happen on the journey between the promise of talent and final celebrity! What storms may break before the corn ripens!'" (as cited in Guest, 1953, p. 11).) From there, Livry performed in the ballet *divertissement* of the opera *Herculaneum* and created the lead rôle of Farfalla in Marie Taglioni's ballet *Le Papillon*, cementing her reputation as a young dancer of extreme ability and extremer promise. Critics and journalists began to speak of her as the 'hope' of the French ballet.

Other *rôles* and *divertissement* performances followed, and by 1863 Livry was rehearsing

1 This condensed biography is based on Ivor Guest's excellent chapter on Livry's life in The Ballet of the Second Empire: 1858-1870, which gives a much richer account of her development as an artist, her contracts, her performances, and her style.

to appear in the opera *La Muette de Portici*, portraying the mute Fenella in a miming part. On November 15, 1862, during a dress rehearsal, as Livry prepared to take to the stage, she stood up and shook out her skirt, forgetful of the wing-light alongside. The sudden movement caused a flame to dart over its guard and touch her skirt.

> *Don't move, mademoiselle!" shouted a fireman, as he rushed towards her. Hearing him shout, Emma looked back and saw the flames rising from her costume. Panic-stricken, she ran down from the rock onto the stage. Almost at once, the flames were rising into the air three times her height. […] Enveloped in a searing column of fire, Emma screamed three times in her terror… […] Then from the wings, one of the firemen, Muller, ran out with the safety-blanket, caught her, threw her to the ground, and, by rolling with her on the boards, at last succeeded in extinguishing the savage flames. Before Emma lost consciousness, her form could be distinguished beneath the sodden blanket, in an attitude of prayer. (Guest, 1953, pp. 30-1)*

Following the accident, Livry was rushed to her home on a stretcher as a "curious and sympathetic crowd" looked on (Guest, 1953, p. 31). Livry's physician, Dr. Laborie (one of the Opéra's in-house doctors), assessed that "'The fire had caused very extensive burns, covering both thighs, the loins, the back, the shoulders, and both arms… Her condition appears very serious, not because of the depth of the burns, but because of their extent.' Her face and chest were barely touched" (as cited in Guest, 1953, p. 32). Her mother and various doctors attempted to alleviate her pain and settle her in for what would undoubtedly be a long period of recuperation—provided that she survived the initial shock of the injury.

Fresh agonies were to come. "For more than four months," Guest writes, Livry "remained lying face downwards with her arms outstretched… Lemon juice was applied to her burns, and attempts were made to graft flesh in the hope of preventing scars from forming" (1953, p. 32). Livry's doctors forbade her "to speak, and even to groan or weep or make any movement at all, for fear that the feeble tissues that were being encouraged to cover her sores might be damaged. … when she could bear the anguish no longer, when her youth and strength revolted, an impassive voice warned her, "Keep calm if you want to live" (Guest, 1953, pp. 32-3).

Gradually, her condition appeared to improve, and Livry was able to move and speak for short periods of time, and her long isolation gradually reduced. In July of 1863, Livry's mother, her doctor, and a Sister of Charity attempted to transport her to a villa on the Place de Villiers, in the hope that she might recuperate there in greater comfort. According to most accounts, shortly after completing the journey, she contracted either blood poisoning, erysipelas ("a skin infection involving the dermis layer of the skin," which "may also extend to the superficial cutaneous lymphatics"), septicemia, or some combination of the three (Michael and Shaukat, 2023). She died very quickly thereafter, aged only twenty, after an unimaginable ordeal of eight months.

3. The Mire of Sympathy and the Riptide of the Gothic

The somaesthetic approach invites one to consider the body/mind, the soma's interior/exterior, and its "representational/experiential" dimensions simultaneously (Shusterman, 1999, p. 306). This blended or multi-register perspective, however, stands in sharp contrast with traditional ways of writing about and theorizing the Romantic ballerina's embodiment. Ivor Guest's rendition of Emma Livry's injury and false convalescence serves as a clear example of conventional practice. Guest's history is touchingly and elegantly told, interweaving contemporary textual resources

with a solemn and sympathetic narrative voice. While some contemporary accounts of Livry's accident did chronicle her convalescence, Guest labors to narrativize the previously 'veiled' period of her life that lay between her burning and her funeral—to illuminate the dark crevasse of Emma Livry's personal experience of that last agonizing period of quiet suffering. However, his telling does not escape—and indeed indulges rather freely with—the impulse towards uncritical romanticization that dogs so many narratives of Romantic death. To romanticize an event or being is to transform it into a work of art, to render it as a monument, or else to hyper-individuate it. I specifically choose to call this process "romanticization" to reference the birth of the aesthetic paradigm that I mention above, the valorization and obsessive aestheticization of the white ballerina's body.

Romanticization is fundamentally an act of displacement. The language of romanticization performs a similar manipulation as the medical pain scale, which deadens and extrapolates pain into something quantifiable and graspable. The process of romanticizing the ballerina's body, then, produces a 'cartoon' or 'manifest' Romanticism. Cartoon Romanticism constructs the Romantic ballet as a microcosm of the saccharine and the tragic. Its delicate bodies are pronounced too beautiful for this world; accordingly, must vanish into thin air. This uncritical celebration of the 'body that dies beautifully' offers the onlooker a sense of spiritual solace and recompense.[2] However, upon closer inspection, one begins to see a Romantic ballet that is at war with itself. Cartoon Romanticism valorizes the delicate and imperiled body in a way that is undercut by the brutal history of Romantic ballet itself.

Traditional narratives of the death of the ballerina adopt a 'segmented' or partial (which is to say, non-somaesthetic) schematic of the body. Ivor Guest's (1953) accounting cannot attend unswervingly to Livry's wounded body because it is busy attending to her piety, her modesty, and her goodness—the conditions of her interior being. The romanticizing quality of Guest's (1953) writing is not directly or entirely attributable to Guest himself; his description of Livry's death is more or less a direct translation of an article Paul d'Ambert (1863) wrote for *Le Nain Jaune* immediately following the ballerina's death. D'Ambert's (1863) emphasis on Livry's spiritual qualities, her highly developed sense of chastity, and her selfless compassion reflect the commemorative sensibilities of the mid-nineteenth century. That said, while the sentiments *originate* with d'Ambert, Guest (1953) makes unapologetic use of the vocabulary and rhetoric of nineteenth-century sympathy—a vocabulary that has maintained a pervasive and disturbing hold on the language of Romantic ballet. The d'Ambert-Guest script *does* incorporate a few pointed descriptions of Livry's injured body, such as the mentions of the doctors applying lemon juice to her burns and their attempts to graft unblemished skin onto the worst of her wounds. However, these graphic snapshots are embedded within a larger and ultimately overmastering frame of her impenetrable piety. Indeed, d'Ambert's descriptions echo similar passages in the print eulogy of Hannah Gale, as well as countless other articles describing similar tragedies befalling young *danseuses*.

Like Gale, the Livry of the *Le Nain Jaune* article becomes a font of comfort for the loved ones who will survive her: "during these terrible crises, her greatest concern was to console her mother. In the convulsions of an agony repeated twenty times before taking her away, she smiled at her and assured her that she was well. The mother of such a girl can never console herself" (d'Ambert, 1863, p. 2). Livry is rendered perfectly chaste and moral; realizing, after the flames are put out, that her body is exposed to view, she attempts to cover herself with the "scorched and tattered remains" of her costume (Guest, 1953, p. 31). Although Livry does not literally

2 The 'body that dies beautifully' includes both 'that-which-dies-while-still-beautiful' and 'that-which-is-rendered-beautiful-in-dying.'

lie before the reader, the text invites us, momentarily, to imagine her divested, "nearly naked," smoking from flames only just extinguished, guttering with a shame provoked by modesty's forcible interruption (Guest, 1953, p. 31). The fire has burned not only her clothing, but even the very surface of her flesh in a cruel and irreversible denuding.

D'Ambert's (1863) instinct appears to be to write protectively of his subject. Working from the assumption that this grim anecdote is true and not a fanciful fabrication on the part of the author, the descriptions of Livry's grace in the face of suffering have the effect of drawing an enshrouding screen over her body, which has been exposed to us on every possible register through the description of her accident. This spell of protection also shelters those who read from the awful revelations of the devastated body. Readers of *Le Nain Jaune* will find no nightmare vision of their beloved *danseuse* crazed with all-encompassing terror, agony, and despair, slicked with blood and tears, spangled with fluid-filled blisters, her exposed tissues as dreadfully scarlet as meat on a butcher's slab. Instead, they will find only images of Emma Livry the patient—supine, composed, and resigned to selfless silence.

In text, d'Ambert (1863)—and later Guest (1953)—eagerly provide Livry with a touching moral apotheosis, transforming, for others if not for Livry herself, the too-painful and unimaginable eight months of her suffering into a legible spiritual journey with a worthwhile destination:

> *This death is as poetic, as ideal as her life. The dear child smiled at the sky that opened before her eyes, … she wept for those she was going to leave; her youth, her success, her lost future. She sank on her stem, like a dried flower in the rays of the sun, leaving behind her perfume, that is to say a reflection of her soul in the memories of those who loved her. (d'Ambert, 1863, p. 2)*

If the death is "poetic," then it may be read, interpreted, and understood, and it is sure to contain meaning (d'Ambert, 1863, 2). Emma Livry's body is rendered flower-like; her death, like the eventual withering of all flowers, becomes suddenly natural—even anticipated.

In life, a ballerina may portray, and by extension may be said to resemble, all manner of delightful things—butterflies, flowers, cupids, houris, sylphs, nymphs, jewels, sprites, princesses, exotic nomads, shadows, fairies, stars, goddesses, birds, angels, ghosts, dream-visions, priestesses, dolls, 'savages,' or even the enthralling geometries of point, line, parabola, and vector. It is the nature of the Romantic ballerina to *become*—to transform into something that is not herself, something beautiful and remote, something illusive and temporary. The dancer in performance takes on the weight of hyper-embodiment, a vessel for representation and fantasy, aesthetic pleasure and *frisson*.

In death, the haze of transposition surrounding the ballerina's body does not dissipate—it *intensifies*. What could come more naturally to the writer's pen than the metaphor of the wilting flower? What could be more touching, more beautiful, than the thought of Emma Livry permanently escaping gravity as she leaps into the open arms of Heaven? By the logic of the d'Ambert-Guest narrative, Livry's accident, in freeing her of the cumbersome weight of her body, might be said to perfect her. If the story is tragic, it is principally because Livry, in dying, leaves behind her a Paris Opéra that is more conspicuously imperfect, more resolutely doomed and fragmentary. As Livry is the 'great hope of French ballet,' the boundaries of her body extend outward to absorb the entirety of the Paris Opéra in the moment of her greatest distress. Her

wound takes on the shadowy weight of the Opéra's wounding, and her death becomes its dying.

In preserving the romanticizing language of d'Ambert's (1863) *Le Nain Jaune* article, Guest (1953) continues the tradition of disfiguring Emma Livry, rendering her burnt body truly shadow-like, until it becomes a secondary, transparent, intangible figment of the Emma Livry captured in language, always attached, but ever distant and apt to fade from view, distorting as the long hours eke by and merging into the undifferentiated darkness of the night.

The language of sympathy renders visceral images palatable, anodyne (in all senses of the word), and heavy with tragic irony or deeper significance—but by no means is this the only method of transfiguring and disfiguring the ballerina's body via language. A century after Eyre Massey Shaw (1867) attempts to compile as comprehensive a list as possible of theater fires, Mary Swift (1982) assembles a list of American ballerinas who perished by burning between the years of 1850 and 1870. Just as Shaw admits his list is almost certainly not exhaustive, Swift notes that "Probably there were more of these young victims" who have been lost, whether by archival slippage or deliberate concealment, to silent obscurity (1982, p. 8). Although Swift's account of ballet's burnt legions is impressively thorough, naming a terrible host of dead and injured, the circumstances of their accidents, their wounds, and their times of death, Swift falls prey to the same romanticizing impulse as Guest in his tender narrativization of Emma Livry. "Ballet history is replete with tales of horror, of tender maidens engulfed in flames that charred their milk-white flesh," Swift writes in the opening sentence of her article, opting for terms that indulge in the vivid imagery of the fairy tale, the penny dreadful, or even the giallo film (Swift, 1982, p. 1). We might choose to call this 'Gothic language.' Gothic language harnesses the sensuous (or even erotic) excitement and agitation of lurid oppositions (indeed, recall Anne Radcliffe's famous description of the Alpine landscapes of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, "beauty sleeping in the lap of horror") (2001, p. 39). Our example of this aesthetic disjunction shall be an anonymous Victorian poem describing the spate of burning *danseuses*:

There are perils dire

Which oft beset the Ballet Girl,

And worst of all is Fire!

Most deadly of the deadly foes that threaten player folk,

An enemy who never sleeps, whose power is ne'er broke,

While of the groups Theatrical, the greatest risk who run

Are lightly costumed ballerinas—escape for them is none.

A spark upon the muslin dry, then instantly it lights into a flame,

Like lightning's flash, at sea, on summer nights,

A blazing mass of agony, all maddened, quick they fly,

Yet fly not from the enemy who dooms them thus to die

That shrivels up the glowing limbs, and face and form, alas!

Leaving of female loveliness a charred and calcined mass.

Ah, happy if they die at once, and from Life's stage retire,

> *Than linger on in torment from the all-remorseless fire. (as cited in Kelly, 2014, p. 71)*

Like Swift's account, this poem of warning revolves around the juxtaposition of pleasing and terrifying images, in the jolt of "loveliness … charred and calcined" (p. 71).

Both of these strategies of romanticization explore, by different avenues, representations of sublimity—modes of bodily transcendence. Sympathy discards, and discards joyously, the body, while the Gothic mode discards all else, until only the body remains. Mary Swift's Gothic tone, like the *Daily Dispatch* (1861) article and the *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* (1861) illustration, aestheticizes and hyper-embodies the burned American dancers. While each representation of dancerly death presents unique problems in its portrayal of the body, I find the language of sympathy to be the more damning of the two because of its tendency towards wholesale erasure. As such, it is all the more distressing when Swift (1982), as her article continues, shifts away from the Gothic mode and appears to accept without suspicion the language of sympathy that haunts the nineteenth-century ballet-girl's eulogy:

> *Their stories afford many insights into nineteenth-century theatrical practices, but perhaps it tells more about the very ballet girls them-selves. Far from being hard, coarse floozies, as they are sometimes depicted, these dancers were very often, it seems, gentle, sweet dutiful daughters, often the sole support of a needy family. (Swift, 1982, pp. 8-9)*

Richard Shusterman writes that dance is potentially "the most paradigmatic of somatic arts," and yet for centuries the conventional vocabularies of the Romantic ballet have remained in a bizarre deadlock between Gothic language's obsessive scrutiny of the body and the language of sympathy's willful disembodiment (2012, p.8). D'Ambert's *Le Nain Jaune* article, printed in 1863, shapes Guest's *The Ballet of the Second Empire*, which was first published in 1953. Swift's article emerges a few decades later in 1982—and yet the original language of "gentle, sweet dutiful daughters" is still there, doggedly clinging to the ballerina for nearly 120 years, never meaningfully changed or challenged (pp. 8-9). Even Deirdre Kelly's well-regarded *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection*, published a further 32 years later in 2014, cannot avoid adopting this language, albeit more cautiously, using the more flexible language of 'seems-to-have-been' and 'by-all-accounts-was.'

The language of sympathy, surely, emerges most often from a place of genuine compassion and fellow-feeling. It is not without merit; it performs a public or communal form of mourning that gives expression to grief—and perhaps more importantly, the intense desire for meaning and catharsis and the hope for the sufferer's release from pain. It may also serve, again, the purpose of shielding the dead from scrutiny or even personal humiliation—it is very possible indeed that Emma Livry wanted (or would have wanted) nothing whatsoever said of her injured body or her struggle to recuperate. Highly possible, too, is that many of the dead were "gentle, sweet dutiful daughters," or selfless and charitable, or godly and devoted, or "hard, coarse floozies," or any combination of so much overdetermined, eulogistic ballast (Swift, 1982, pp. 8-9). We cannot know now. Nevertheless, the language of sympathy is an interminable problem when reckoning with accounts of the body and its capacity to suffer.

The same lithographs of Grisi, Cerrito, and Elssler, the same anecdotes of Taglioni, the same tired passages of Gautier's criticism are trotted out again and again in each new history of the

period. Gautier himself seems to register a sense of the long self-cannibalization of Romantic ballet as early as 1853:

> *The cycle of romantic legends from which plots for ballets have been drawn these many years is on the point of being exhausted. The stories of Musäus, the brothers Grimm and Heinrich Heine have been widely used; swan-women, elves, nixes, wilis, valkyries have brought their graceful sabbaths into the blue gleam of German moonlight. Have we not seen enough of those white apparitions, lifting the sheets of water lilies on slumbering lakes and revealing their blonde heads crowned with gladioli, arrowheads and forget-me-nots before the enchanted gaze of some noble knight who has lost his way in the magic forest? Have they not been dragged around enough, those nocturnal dancers, the hems of their dresses turned green from the moisture of damp grass that has felt the foot-prints of their fairy rounds? ("Opéra: Aelia et Mysis" 250)*

Those of us who remain long after Romantic ballet's passing hang our heads again and again for the inevitable destruction of Emma Livry, Giuseppina Bozzacchi, Clara Webster, and Adèle Grantzow, mourning what-will-have-been-lost in an endless beating of the breast. The same gestures are repeated in a pantomimic reprisal that never seems to lose its appeal.

Jacques Derrida writes in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" that "Culture and memory limit the 'reality' of individual death to this extent, they soften or deaden it in the realm of the 'symbolic' (1984, p. 28). That which is symbolic becomes more easily displaced, its materiality substituted for some form of signification that 'stands in' for the body itself. In turn, this recalls Paul de Man's claim that "…what we have done with … all the other dead bodies that appear in romantic literature … is simply to bury them, to bury them in their own texts made into epitaphs and monumental graves. They have been made into statues for the benefit of future archaeologists 'digging in the grounds for the new foundations' of their own monuments" (1984, p. 121). Romanticizing rhetoric in all its forms fails to resist the thrill (or thrall) of language that "textualiz[es] the body," the seduction of knowing and seeing the intimate interiors of its subject, whether those interiors be the soul, rendered—*at last!*—legible to the naked eye, or the secret literality of a corpse's organs, the heart, guts, and mind no longer merely metaphorical, no longer broad abstractions (Shusterman, 1999, p. 309). As the language of romanticization—encompassing both the language of sympathy and the language of the Gothic—attempts to bring the reader 'closer' to its subject, by its very nature it instead forms a barrier between them. Even in the highest paeans to the subject's aesthetic or moral beauty, we might as well be staring at a doll's face. This is a language of representation. It has little correlation to subjecthood, much as it may try. Ultimately, romanticizing language attempts to turn the subject into art. Imagining the body as physically deadened or already dead becomes a form of spiritual compensation. It cannot in good conscience be called writing for the sake of the dead; it is writing for the sake of the living—it is a form that creates and recreates the lost rather than a form that remembers them.

Acknowledgements

A thousand thanks to Claire Colebrook, without whom this project would be little more than a pile of Post-its. Many thanks also to Sabine Doran, Elizabeth Kadetsky, and Janet Lyon for their support, to my mother Margaret Denny for years of encouragement, and to my dear husband Nik Oliver for positively everything.

References

Anonymous (1861, September 16). The death-bed of a ballet girl. *The Adams Sentinel, 1. Gettysburg Adams Sentinel Newspaper Archives*. https://access-newspaperarchive-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/us/pennsylvania/gettysburg/gettysburg-adams-sentinel/1861/09-16/

Anonymous (1868). The holocaust of ballet-girls. *The Lancet*, 91(2333), 631-2.

Anonymous (1861, October 1). "The recent terrible accident at the Continental Theatre in Philadelphia." *Richmond Daily Dispatch.* Boatwright Memorial Library. https://dispatch.richmond.edu/view/secondary-section-view.php?doc=D_020_076&q=ballet&start=1&num=10&div=article&dn=11

Biss, E. (2007). The pain scale. *Creative Nonfiction*, 32, 65–84. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44363570

Caruth, C. (1991). Unclaimed experience: trauma and the possibility of history. *Yale French Studies,* 79, 181–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/2930251

D'Ambert, P. (1863). Emma Livry. *Le nain jaune: journal politique, littéraire et financier*, 23, 1-3. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t596347r/f1.item.zoom#

De Man, P. (1984). Shelley disfigured. *The rhetoric of romanticism* (pp. 93-123). Columbia UP.

Derrida, J. et al. (1984). No apocalypse, not now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives). *Diacritics*, 14(2), 20–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/464756

Duncan, I. (1969). The dance of the future. In S. Cheney (Ed.), *The art of the dance* (pp. 54-63). Theatre Arts Books, 1969.

Duyckinck, E. A. (1845). Barbarities of the theatre. *Broadway Journal*, 1(5), 71-2. https://broadway.dsl.lsu.edu/#/issues/18450201/p5?viewer=pdf&page=5

Fire at the ballet, Continental Theater, Philadelphia, September 14, 1861 [detail]. (1861, September 28). *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 312-313. House Divided: The Civil War Research Engine at Dickinson College, https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/33093

Frightful scene in the dressing-room of the Continental Theatre, Philadelphia, on the evening of Saturday, September 14, 1861—Accidental burning of a portion of the ballet corps while preparing for the dance in Shakespeare's play of the "Tempest," resulting in the death of seven of the dancers.—Sketched by Mr. Oehlschlager, who witnessed the catastrophe [detail]. (1861, September 28). *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* 312-3. Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, https://link-gale-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/apps/doc/GT3012566957/NCNP?u=psucic&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=197e902c

Gautier, T. (1986). Opéra: *Aelia et Mysis*. In I. Guest (Trans. & Ed.), Gautier on dance (pp. 250-6). Dance Books (Original work published 1853).

Guest, I. (1953). *The ballet of the second empire*: *1858 – 1870*. A. & C. Black.

Kelly, D. (2014). *Ballerina: Sex, scandal, and suffering behind the symbol of perfection*. Greystone Books.

Michael, Y., and Shaukat, N. M. (2023). Erysipelas. *StatPearls* via NCBI. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK532247/

Radcliffe, A. (2001). The mysteries of Udolpho. In *Parentheses*. (Original work published 1794).

Shaw, E. M. (1876). *Fires in theatres*. E. and F. N. Spon.

Shusterman, R. (1999). Somaesthetics: A disciplinary proposal. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57(3), 299-313.

Shusterman, R. (2012). *Thinking through the body: Essays in somaesthetics.* Cambridge University Press.

Swift, M. G. (1982). Dancers in flames. *Dance Chronicle*, 5(1), 1-10. Taylor & Francis, Ltd. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567482